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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001022

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/28/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [CVIS](#) [KU](#)
SUBJECT: KUWAIT: PRIME MINISTER'S WASHINGTON VISIT STRIKES
POSITIVE CHORD AT HOME

REF: KUWAIT 936

Classified By: Political Counselor Peter O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (SBU) Notwithstanding their preoccupation with fasting and feasting during the holy Ramadan season, Kuwaitis were almost universally pleased with Prime Minister Shaykh Nasser Al Mohammed Al Sabah's September 18-19 visit to Washington and his subsequent visit to New York, where he addressed the UNGA. For Kuwaitis, the PM's high-level meetings -- capped by a September 19 meeting with the President -- served as a welcome reminder that the U.S. values its relationship with Kuwait and appreciates the contributions this country has made to stability in Iraq and the wider Gulf region. These positive views were reflected in generally balanced media coverage of the visit and in numerous late night Embassy conversations with Kuwaiti movers and shakers as we made the rounds during the busy Ramadan diwaniya season.

Press Coverage Focuses On The Positive

12. (SBU) While press coverage during this period focused heavily on domestic Ramadan events, the U.S. presidential race, and the global economic crisis, significant press coverage was also awarded to the PM's visit, with photographs of the PM's meetings with the President and Secretary receiving especially wide distribution. Both Arabic and English-language dailies widely reported the PM's meeting with the President and other senior U.S. officials, underscoring the President's observation that "Kuwait is a strategic partner of the United States." The press coverage also highlighted Kuwaiti gratitude, as repeatedly expressed by the PM, for the U.S. role in liberating Kuwait from Iraq in 1991. The President's expression of thanks to Kuwait for its recent swearing-in of an ambassador to Iraq and for "being such a good security partner in the region" was also duly noted. The PM's meetings with the Secretary, Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff, Deputy Treasury Secretary Kimmitt and Deputy Defense Secretary England were reported, as were the PM's sessions with House Speaker Pelosi and Senators Reid, Warner and Barrasso. The Kuwaiti press also noted the PM's meeting with Kuwaiti students in the U.S., where he encouraged the students to respect U.S. law and to study hard, expressing the hope that Kuwaitis would soon be engaged in space exploration and other scientific pursuits.

PM "Proud" of U.S. Action to Resolve Wall Street Crisis

13. (SBU) Lending positive support to the President's efforts to resolve the Wall Street financial crisis in the U.S., the leading English-language daily Kuwait Times on September 25 prominently reported comments the PM delivered in New York

stating that he was "glad and proud" of swift action by the U.S. administration to rescue the finance industry by calling on Congress to authorize a USDOLS 700 billion package to assist banks and other institutions struggling with bad debt. Kuwaitis were also tickled to learn that the PM was, as reported in the same story, the "first Arab Prime Minister ever to ring the bell opening the day's trading in the New York Stock Exchange." (Note: On a more sober note, Kuwait Investment Authority managing director Badr Al Saad noted publicly that KIA was not in the business of saving foreign banks. KIA has come under some criticism for some of its investments in the troubled U.S. financial sector, e.g. Merrill Lynch and Citigroup, which have suffered losses. End Note.)

Wishful Thinking on Guantanamo Detainees

14. (SBU) From the outset, Kuwaitis understood that the PM would be raising with his U.S. interlocutors a range of bilateral issues, with a strong focus on security issues and counter-terrorism cooperation. The PM informed the Kuwaiti press ahead of time that he would be raising the fate of "our sons held at Guantanamo" -- a long-standing and highly emotive issue here -- while at the same time reaffirming "Kuwait's firm rejection of terrorism or backing it by any form." In an over-zealous September 29 story Kuwait's Arab Times English-language daily mis-reported that the PM had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with U.S. officials that could soon lead to the release of remaining Kuwaiti detainees. In a somewhat more accurate vein, the same story reported that the USG encouraged Kuwaiti officials to conduct

KUWAIT 00001022 002 OF 002

rehabilitation programs for prisoners after their release. (Note: The Arabic-language version of the same daily reported that release of Kuwaiti detainees would only occur after U.S. pre-conditions including rehabilitation programs, domestic trials and travel bans were implemented. End Note.)

PM's Visit Gives Boost to Pending U.S.-Kuwait Agreements

15. (SBU) While there is not, in fact, any MOU regarding the release of Kuwaiti detainees, three potential agreements were in play during the PM's visit. These include a U.S./Kuwait Agreement on Broadcast Hours Exchange, an Agreement on Vital Infrastructure Protection, and a Challenge Inspection Agreement. While each of these are agreements that the USG has sought for some time, the Kuwaiti MFA only put forward its versions of the prospective agreements just days before the PM's visit and, despite yeoman efforts by an MFA legal team here and Washington counterparts, it was not possible to dot all the "i's" in time for a signing during the PM's visit. Embassy believes, however, that the impetus from the PM's visit will allow us to push at least some of these agreements to fruition in the near term. The PM's visit also provided an opportunity for both sides to consider modalities for enhanced cooperation in the area of educational exchanges and, in particular, for clearing Kuwaiti student visa applications faster. While some 3000 Kuwaiti students currently study in the U.S. many Kuwaitis believe that Kuwaiti students undergo a tougher screening process than students from some other Arab countries. The PM's visit went a long way toward clearing up that misconception and informing Kuwaitis that the U.S., in fact, welcomes Kuwaiti students.

Comment

16. (C) Not all reviews were laudatory, however. Several interlocutors suggested that coverage of the PM's visit in the Arabic press was relatively limited, reflecting general skepticism with his leadership role. One observer remarked wryly that the PM's opening of Wall Street's trading was

ominous, coinciding as it did with the collapse of U.S. financial markets. Another rumor suggested (wrongly) that the President's invitation had been to the Amir, who had chosen not to travel during the Ramadan period. The PM, meanwhile, had opted to "escape" his onerous duties managing a fractious parliament at home, per these wags.

¶7. (C) Overall, nonetheless, the PM's visit is viewed here as an important success that underscored the existing strong U.S.- Kuwait bilateral ties and the need for continued cooperation to safeguard regional security and promote our common interests in thwarting terrorism. If nothing else, it elicited senior Kuwaiti leadership public statements on the need for CT diligence, in stark contrast to the deafening silence that followed the April Mosul bombings involving a former Kuwaiti GTMO detainee. End Comment.

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